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WASHINGTON, D.C. - A bipartisan commission is urging Congress to fund a scholarship program to boost the number of students who study abroad to 1 million annually by 2017, saying it's critical to U.S. interests globally.

The proposed Abraham Lincoln Study Abroad Fellowship Program was a dream of the late Sen. Paul Simon, D-Ill.

The goal is to increase young adults' understanding of foreign languages and cultures, to achieve "global competency," an aim brought home dramatically with the desperate search for Arabic, Farsi and Pashto translators after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, the commission states in a report being released today.

"I think this is a critical component of the country's future," said commission Chairman M. Peter McPherson. "It is not a frill. It is a need for our economic competitiveness and our national security strength."

McPherson acknowledged the current tight fiscal constraints on Congress, as it struggles to pay for the war in Iraq and the war on terrorism and disaster relief efforts at home. The commission seeks \$50 million in 2006, increasing up to \$125 million annually in 2011. The figure is significantly less than the \$3.5 billion Simon had proposed.

Sen. Dick Durbin, D-Ill, who is a member of the Senate Appropriations Committee and also served on the commission, pledged to work within Congress to fund the program.

"The challenges we face as Americans are increasingly global in nature and our youth must be well prepared for its future," Durbin said. "The United States' capacity to lead in the 21st century demands that we school new generations of students in cultural and social realities beyond what they may have grown up with in the United States."

Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Richard Lugar, R-Ind., and Sen. Joe Biden, the senior Democrat on the committee, also endorsed the committee's recommendations.

However, Rep. Mark Kirk, R-Wilmette, the only Republican member of Congress on the commission, said he wants the program to place a priority on those studying Arabic and Chinese.

"I think that we would strengthen our argument with the Congress if we specifically said we are going to address the gaps that we have in the number of people who speak Arabic and Chinese. Knowing my colleagues, I think that it would make the argument stronger," said Kirk, a member of the House Appropriations Committee.

The commission recommends that the scholarships be used to provide more minority students the opportunity to study overseas and to increase the number of students studying in strategically important parts of the world such as Latin America, Africa, the Middle East and the former Soviet Union.

Currently, more than 190,000 U.S. undergraduates study abroad annually, including 6,395 from Illinois. They are predominately white, female and from four-year universities and colleges. Two-thirds of those studying abroad go to Europe.

"Just as President Lincoln opened up higher education to the nation through the establishment of the land grant colleges and universities, study abroad must be made more available and affordable to all students," said William DeLauder, the commission's executive director.

In his final months, Simon was in Washington discussing the need to strengthen the country's international understanding. A month after his death in December 2003, Congress funded the commission to recommend ways to carry out the idea he had championed. Congress allocated \$250,000 in federal funds and another \$340,000 was donated by private institutions and individuals.

In addition to Durbin and Kirk, the 17-member commission includes former Illinois Gov. Jim

Edgar and Northern Illinois University President John Peters.